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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experiences of teaching a college course entitled "Psychology in the Nuclear Age" and highlights how research, clinical work, and activism influence the professional role of the teacher. The paper sought to raise a number of questions, including: What is meant by peace education? Should teachers remain objective or do they have an educational as well as moral responsibility to state their personal positions in the classroom? Is teaching a course on peace or nuclear issues a political action? What do students report about how they are affected by the course? How do teachers handle the intense feelings that these topics may evoke in students? and Do teachers have a responsibility to help their students take political action? Contains 5 references. (DB)

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Peace Education, Activism, and the Role of the Psychology Professor

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Wheaton Colege

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Peace Education, Activism, and the Role of the Psychology Professor

A recent survey of college psychology teachers (Murphy & Polyson, 1991) revealed that quite a few are currently offering courses on--or including in other courses discussion of--peace, war, and nuclear issues. An even larger number of those surveyed indicated a desire to teach about such topics. Having spent considerable time thinking about the pedagogical implications and obligations of courses which deal with these issues, I would like to share my experiences during the past four years teaching a course entitled Psychology in the Nuclear Age.

I hope this discussion will raise a number of questions, including the following: What do we mean by peace education? What is our role as educators? Should we remain objective or do we have an educational as well as moral responsibility to state our personal positions in the classroom? Is teaching a course on peace or nuclear issues a political action? What is it like as a faculty member to teach a course on nuclear issues? What do students report about how they are affected by the course? How do we handle the intense feelings that these topics may evoke in our students? How do we handle our own feelings when we are faced with our students' discouragement, despair, and anxiety about nuclear issues? And finally, do we have a responsibility to help our students take political action?

I would like to start by providing some background on who I am and how I got into teaching a course on psychology in the nuclear age, as a way of suggesting the interface between the personal, the professional, and the political. My involvement in peace education and peace issues has always been related to my professional role. I went to college in the 70s and as was true for many college students at that time, I

became involved in peace issues because of the war in Vietnam. My latest rebirth as a "peace person" was in the 1980s, but this time it came through research rather than activism.

One of my partners in group practice described a lecture she had attended on atomic veterans, the 250,000 to 300,000 men who were routinely exposed to nuclear radiation in the above-ground nuclear testing in the western part of the United States and the Pacific between 1946 and 1963. As family therapists, several of us in the practice became interested in exploring how the radiation exposure affected not only the veterans themselves, but their families. We created the Atomic Veterans Family Project, a research project in which we interviewed atomic veterans and their families about the psychological effects of radiation exposure (Murphy, Ellis & Greenberg, 1990).

My research with these atomic veterans led me to activism. After talking to the atomic veterans, I found that I could no longer simply just do research, that I needed to take action on these issues. In 1988 I went to Nevada to the nuclear test site to participate in non-violent civil disobedience to protest the continued underground testing of nuclear weapons. It was a very powerful experience for me because this was of course the place that many of the men that I'd interviewed talked about. The experience reflects one of the ways my activism came from my research.

In addition, my professional life as a clinician was affected by my concerns about peace and nuclear issues. I recently wrote an article with my colleague John Reusser about the ways in which family therapists are addressing nuclear issues (Reusser & Murphy, 1990; Murphy & Reusser, 1992). And, togther with my colleagues from the Atomic Veterans Project, we have authored another article for

clinicians working with families exposed to invisible environmental contaminants (Ellis, Greenberg, Murphy & Reusser).

What follows, however, is a discussion of how my research, my clinical work, and my activism influenced my professional role as a teacher. I'm currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College. Because of the way my involvement in peace and nuclear issues came from my role as a psychologist, I was very much interested in exploring further the contributions psychologists have made to an understanding of peace, war and nuclear issues. As a result, I developed a course entitled "Psychology in the Nuclear Age." I have taught this course for four years; for three years it has been a senior seminar, and a total of 63 students have taken the course, 62 of whom have been women. (The first year I taught the course I was at Holy Cross College, which is co-educational; however, of the 13 students who took the course, 12 were women. For the next three years I taught the course at Wheaton College, which although currently co-educational had been until recently a women's college, so most of the students in my senior seminar were women.)

The course begins with a discussion of how we can apply psychological concepts to living in the nuclear age. We talk about phenomena such as psychic numbing so that as we begin to explore nuclear issues the students will have a concept that helps them to understand their own reactions. We then examine psychological reactions to actual nuclear exposure, starting with those people who were exposed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also including some of the work that I've done with the atomic veterans. We then discuss the psychological reactions of livin with the nuclear threat.

The second and larger part of the course focuses on the various subfields of psychology and the applications of particular concepts to nuclear issues. Students working in groups of three or four take responsibility for the second part of the course. They are responsible for providing the class with readings about a particular psychological concept and for facilitating a discussion or developing an exercise that helps us apply the concept to nuclear issues. For example, we might talk about Milgram's experiment in obedience as a way for students to understand how someone could be trained to push the nuclear button. Students might review the literature on persuasion and be asked to apply what they learned to a campaign for or agianst the building of a nuclear power plant. Another topic that we might explore is children's development, that is, how children understand nuclear issues and how a peace education program could be designed that would be responsive to the needs of children at developmental stages. The course operates as an integrative seminar; it can pursue a variety of topics, applying psychological concepts as a way of understanding nuclear issues.

In addition to reading two or three articles or chapters for each class and participating in discussion, the students are required to keep a journal divided into three sections in which they write about their reactions to the readings, to the class discussions, and to the audio-visual materials that they see. The journal allows them not only to talk about their intellectual process, that is, how they are making sense of what they're learning, but also gives me a chance to monitor their emotional reactions and how they are dealing with what's going on in the course.

When students first become aware of nuclear issues, they often experience a feeling of despair. They report feeling overwhelmed and frightened. About three

weeks into the course, we begin to talk about the psychological effects of exposure to nuclear radiation, and we read Lifton's Death and Life or John Hershey's Hiroshima. We also see the film "Hiroshima and Nagasaki," an extremely powerful film with very explicit images of people who were exposed to nuclear radiation after the dropping of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The students react, of course, to that film. I would like to quote from one of them:

> *Professor Murphy suggested that we break into small groups and talk about what we just saw, so we did. No one could talk, it was such a bizarre experience. So many people were affected by this movie. I think that's because it was so real. When I started to speak I also started to cry. This scared me. Did that mean that I was letting my defenses down, was I no longer engaging in psychic numbing? I could barely say a word. Images from the movie keep popping into my mind. Everything became so real. All I could think of was my family and David* [her boyfriend] *and my friends. It was an experience I wanted to forget. I walked out of class that day by myself. I was unable to talk to anyone and I was afraid.*

In another class I shared with the students some of my research on the atomic veterans and showed them some film clips from the interviews. One of the students responded,

> *I'm absolutely stunned at the ignorance of the United States during this period of nuclear testing. I can't believe that they actually sent people out there. I can't believe that they jeopardized marine biology in the Pacific Ocean to that degree. I can't believe that they thought that the radiation could be scrubbed away. Finally, I can't believe that they had the audacity to deny these people the little bit of restitution that they could make to them.*

Clearly, as the students become aware of nuclear issues and the effects of nuclear radiation exposure, they begin to feel overwhelmed and saddened. But they also begin to feel an increased sense of knowledge, and this greater knowledge about nuclear issues seems to make them feel better about themselves:

> *Before taking this course my knowledge about nuclear arms, nuclear policies, and the effects of nuclear war were small. Now I think I have a more comprehensive understanding of the subject in general. I can support aneducated opinion. Not merely just say that I think this isn't the thing to do.*

Another student reported,

> *...now I feel more confident that I can debate on the issues concerning nuclear war because I have more knowledge.*

Their growing knowledge is not only about the effect of nuclear exposure, but also about the application of psychological concepts to nuclear issues. And the knowledge they acquire and the feelings they experience lead the students to action and to finding their own voices. Interestingly, the actions that the students takes most often occurres in a relational context. What did the students do? First, they talked to their roommates. A surprising number of students who were not in the class came up to me and said,

> *Oh my God, my roommate is in your class and she keeps reading to me from these books. She's so political these days. I can't have one conversation where she isn't talking about nuclear issues.*

And the students in the class often echo the following comment:

> *It's very important for me to discuss these issues with my friends because they help me understand my fears. They also bring me back to reality by telling me I can't change the world in a day. Because I'm so emotional I need to talk about these things with other people. How they feel and how I feel. Somehow it makes me feel better.*

The students not only talked to their friends, but they began to talk to their families, because, as one put it,

> *I wanted to have my family get involved with me because they're the closest people to me and I want them to be aware of these issues.*

One student interviewed three generations in her family. She spoke to her parents and her grandparents and asked them what their concerns were about nuclear issues. After watching a film which touched on children's fear of nuclear issues, another woman spoke to her parents about her concerns that her little brother might be worried. She wanted her parents to begin to talk to her brother

about these issues.

The students' actions moved from the more immediate relational context of family and friends to the broader context of the community at large. One student coordinated the class response to a request from Neil Wollman of Manchester College in Indiana, who is working on a peace action calendar which provides on every day several suggestions for actions a person might take to promote world peace. The student took responsibility for gathering suggestions from the class that were then sent to Neil.

Another instance of student involvement occurred in connection with a conference sponsored by the Boston Women's Peace Research Group, of which I am a founding member. I asked the class if any of them wanted to attend, indicating that they would be welcome to come for free and do some work during the conference. Five students attended, and one made contact with a person with whom she arranged to do an internship working in the peace movement the next year.

However, not all the actions undertaken by students were successful. One group of seniors wanted to have their classmates wear anti-nuclear buttons at graduation. They had a lot of energy for the project in the classroom, but when it came time to organize outside of the classroom, they just couldn't make it happen.

A significant aspect of the way students began to think about taking action is that a relational context was clearly important to them. Taking action was not something they felt motivated to do on their own. When a group of students leading a class on activism asked their classmates whether or not they thought they would take an activist position after the course, responses included the following:

> *Only if I have others to march with. I need people to motivate me. I'm not sure why, maybe for support.*

Not unless I was encouraged by others or heard through others of ways of responding. I would want friends to join me and motivate me. I think it's related to psychic numbing as to why I alone wouldn't initiate it.

I think the moment that was most significant for me, when I began to recognize the importance of group activities, was when I was planning to participate in the protest at the Nevada nuclear test site. The students knew about my planned trip because during the class in which I shared my work on the atomic veterans they had asked me, "How do you handle your feelings about this? Doesn't it make you mad? Don't you feel upset about what these vets are telling you?". I said that one of the ways I handled it was by taking action. The students were clearly excited that I was going and wished that they could go, too, but couldn't afford to. I knew that the organizers of the protest were asking that people who wanted to stop the underground nuclear testing but were unable to attend arrange to make handprints that could be used to encircle the test site during the protest. I told my students that they certainly could give me handprints that I would be happy to take with me to the protest.

One of the students in the class said she really wanted to make sure that not just the students in our class but all Wheaton students had an opportunity to make their presence felt at the test site. She didn't want students to simply do it on their own; she wanted the students in our class to talk to their friends and colleagues and to tell them about what it was that concerned them about nuclear issues so that the handprints they gathered would represent genuinely informed protest. We didn't have time to do that because I was leaving the next week, but we did approach members of the another class that focuses on nuclear issues and asked them if they wanted to join in the project. My class created a banner with the Wheaton emblem in the

center, and all of the students, faculty, and staff who were interested added their handprints to it. It was a very powerful experience, one which reflected togetherness and community effort, as suggested in the following student comment:

> *I wanted to trace my hand for Professor Murphy's journey, because I felt that if I did I would be doing something. I know it's not much, but with the group also doing it I felt united. By making this project a group activity, I feel like I'm not the only one concerned. Someone feels the same way I do.*

This experience beautifully underlines the importance of mutual empathy in a relational context for activism in these young women. Each time I've taught the course it has been important for the students to feel that there was a way they could take some action. We always have a class on activism in which we talk about what motivates activism and the difference between being an activist and a survivalist from a psychological perspective. The discussion not only covers the psychological issues related to activism, but also provides an opportunity for students to think about their own activism. Sometimes students bring in information about various peace and anti-nuclear groups, and one class made buttons which they wore around the campus for the next month. The students always brainstorm about how they can work for peace.

At the end of the course students write anonymous evaluations of the course in which they express sentiments such as the following:

> *I feel educated about the issues. Now I feel like I can do something. I don't feel so hopeless and I'm not as likely to ignore it..*

> *I used to believe that nuclear war was inevitable, but now I see that action can be taken to prevent it.*

For these women students it was important that their action take place in a relational context. I don't know if it's because they're women, or because they're adolescents. All I can suggest is that these young women seemed to move from a

sense of unawareness, denial, and despair to a place in which they felt more aware, more self confident, and had developed a feeling of response-ability, that is, the ability to respond. This change took place within the context of a mutually empowering relationship with each other, their friends, their family, and finally the wider community.

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